

## Building flood-prone areas



This site at Tal-Marga in Qala, which is prone to extensive flooding after heavy storms, should not be developed.



A quarry turned into a scrapyard at Tal-Palma, Mġarr.

The hamlet of Tal-Palma in Mġarr, Malta, could very well qualify for the dubious honour of having the highest density of planning enforcement notices in the country.

Along a relatively short stretch of a couple of kilometres at most, leading down from Ta' Mrejnu to Il-Palma, one can count at least 15 pending enforcement notices.

*A hotchpotch of condescension and illegality in broad daylight*

- Alan Deidun

One of these in particular, which has been dragging on for over 10 years, should raise eyebrows as it refers to a quarry site beset by controversy and infringements.

For instance, EC/00147/96, which is still operational, refers to an illegal scrapyard on site.

Within the same site, previously enforcement notice EC/00018/94 referred to an extension without permit of the same quarry, but this was duly withdrawn when, on June 30, 1998, the

owners were granted a police permit to use a conveyor belt, sieve and compressor in the quarry.

In addition, enforcement notice EC/00876/98 refers to the construction of a garage within the quarry premises, again without a permit. It was stalled when an application (PA 4801/98) for sanctioning of the same development was approved in 1999.

Most of the other 14 pending enforcement notices in the area refer to storage of trucks, a boat and metal objects on agricultural land without a permit, the excavation of sites and erection of boundary walls without a permit and even the non-permitted change of use of land into a commercial nursery. Well and truly, a hotchpotch of condescension and illegality in broad daylight.

However, the most incredible part of this whole issue is that some foreign residents who bought properties in the area in 1988 had been assured by the then Lands Department that the pit on site could not be quarried and that the owners had been advised to reclaim it with soil.

Needless to say, not only did the promised reclamation not materialise but, to add insult to injury, sandblasting activities resumed shortly after.

Truth be told, on June 30, 1998, the quarry owners were granted a police permit to use a conveyor belt, sieve and compressor in the quarry, but no mention was made of the use of the quarry to hoard, scrap or to build garages or to extend the quarry.

The relevant enforcement notices were still valid when the police permit was issued.

### **Common sense on storm water mitigation**

Government has laudably embarked on finally tackling the storm water issue through an ambitious EU-funded project that seeks to implement the storm water master plan.

Localities that perennially bear the brunt of flooding in the aftermath of heavy storms, such as Birkirkara, Balzan, Lija, Msida and Qormi will surely view such plans with a sense of anticipation, even though many will concede that the current predicament is borne out of a non-judicious approach to the development of valleys and watercourses, as typified by Msida Valley.

However, not everyone seems to be towing the same line. In backwaters (no pun intended) like Qala, two planning applications seek to develop part of the Tal-Marga watercourse which leads from the Nadur high plains down to the coast at Hondoq ir-Rummien.

The applications in question – PA/04724/07 and 07697/06 – propose the construction of four houses with pools and an apartment block with basement garage, respectively, in an Outside Development Zone, which, to put it very mildly, is prone to flooding.

The latter aspect is confirmed in a report drawn up by the Malta Resources Authority (MRA), which is objecting to the development, as well as hydrologist Marco Cremona, and last but not least by residents of the area who have fully documented the flooding of the sites in question through photographic and video footage.

The MRA and Cremona reports are particularly damning. For instance, the MRA report says that “the development plans submitted under PA/04724/07 do not seem to take into consideration the fact that the area is traversed by a watercourse. This fact could in future lead to flooding problems within the site itself.

“It is therefore suggested that a dedicated flood impact assessment study is conducted by the applicant. This would be prudent to avoid possible future damage to properties from flooding and thus also to avert the possibility of claims for damages against government or relevant authorities.”

Such conclusions echo those reached by Mr Cremona, who also points out that such development would negatively affect the yield of shallow wells downstream.

The two planning applications are to be deliberated upon against the backdrop of the local council elections. For the record, the Qala council has laudably given vent to the concerns of the 29 farmers from the area who have signed a petition objecting to the proposed development and calling for the area in question not to be developed.

One augurs that the Qala council's view is taken into consideration given the various speeches we are hearing about the pivotal role local councils play in the community and about the importance of local councils being proactive.

One also hopes that common sense prevails in the coming weeks, lest the commendable work being done to address the flooding problem in Malta and lest the commendable work being

done by Mepa boards in recent months in warding off further ODZ development is to be undone in Qala.

## **Spying on farmers from space**

Space is no longer considered as the new frontier as applications using satellites have been around for quite some time now.

Unfortunately, however, many in Malta are still not acquainted with remote sensing applications, such as the monitoring of water quality and discharges from activities such as aquaculture and oil spills.

One of the most esoteric and quirky remote sensing applications that has emerged recently is the monitoring of farms and farmland to gauge compliance with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and weed out fraudsters.

CAP is a financial mechanism through which billions of euros are siphoned off Europe's coffers to subsidise the continent's farming sector, with some farmers over-inflating claims they make to over-inflate the subsidies they rake in.

So far, such monitoring from space has been conducted by satellites. Besides identifying fraudsters, the monitoring from space can also detect instances of land mismanagement, such as 'grubbing up' the uprootal of olive trees to make space for monocultures – and which contributes to soil erosion.

Scanning a farm with a satellite costs about one-third as much as sending an inspector on a field visit.

But some countries and territories, such as Austria and Scotland, have refused to use them because the mountainous terrain makes it difficult to interpret satellite images.

So now, unmanned drone planes, similar to the ones used for military operations, are being tested for the same purposes.